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ABSTRACT

The prospects for disseminating research to the field of adult basic education and literacy (ABE&L) were assessed by interviewing about 60 ABE&L decision makers and practitioners from 10 different states about their work and information needs. The decision makers set ABE&L policy in states or regions and/or supervised teachers and other staff. The practitioners worked with learners directly through volunteer, part-time, or full-time teaching positions. The interviews established that ABE&L educators seeking to access research and information that would improve their practice face huge structural constraints. However, professional development was high on most interviewees' list of priorities, and provisions for professional development were found in each state examined. Practitioners and decision makers saw a need for both policy-oriented and learner-centered studies. It was recommended that the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy take the following actions to improve the situation regarding dissemination of research to ABE&L: (1) identify, train, and support people who can work with ABE&L decision makers and practitioners in each state; (2) advocate for increased funding for the field and the relevance, practicality, and value of ABE&L's knowledge base; and (3) ensure that funds for dissemination and advocacy do not compete with research funds. (MN)

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National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

INTERIM EVALUATION REPORT #2: THE PROSPECTS FOR DISSEMINATING RESEARCH TO A HUNGRY FIELD

by

Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett

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When the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) began in 1996, we realized the importance of having independent evaluations throughout our history to gauge progress in reaching our main goal: to improve quality of practice in Adult Basic Education. Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett were hired as independent consultants who would produce formative evaluation reports. The purpose of these evaluations is to help NCSALL staff improve implementation activities. What follows is the 2nd evaluation report, which we have published and made available to the field as a whole, based on our feeling that it is a valuable piece of research in itself, about the nature of bridging research and practice.

NCSALL Evaluation Report #2: The Prospects for Disseminating Research to a Hungry Field

During the summer and fall of 1999, we interviewed 60 adult basic education and literacy (ABE&L) decision-makers and practitioners from ten different states about their work and information needs. What they described was a field starved for professional development and little opportunity to sate its appetite. The reasons for this unfortunate circumstance were both extenuating and common. That is, each individual could detail situations and/or events that forced his or her particular program to keep workshops, conferences, and informal sharing from the professional table, but the specifics always boiled down to resources. There was too little money to free up enough non-"hide-taking" time to enable ABE&L educators to sample the occasionally available professional development activities.

In the following pages, we portray the ABE&L field as akin to subsistence farming, with decision makers and practitioners having barely enough support to serve their day-to-day clients and little else to nurture long-term, sustainable professional growth. Our goal in doing so, however, is not to overwhelm the reader with a bleak and gloomy prospect for disseminating research but rather to highlight (1) the points at which research already connects with practitioners and (2) the settings in which practitioners eagerly recount the acquisition of contextually relevant and immediately applicable information. These constructive occurrences could serve as potentially promising signposts for initiating and implementing effective dissemination and outreach.

The report is organized into four sections. The first two are short, with one reviewing the purpose of the evaluation activities – of which this round of field interviews is a part – and the other giving an overview of the means by which we selected interview participants and analyzed their comments. The third section contains our findings about the occupational contexts of ABE&L educators and the role that professional development plays in them. This discussion highlights key research "connect points" to the field and effective information-sharing settings. The final section ventures several recommendations for NCSALL to consider as it continues to wrestle with how to interact meaningfully with ABE&L educators.

Purpose

The overall purpose of this evaluation work is to shed light on NCSALL's impact on the quality of practice and policy in the ABE&L field. In other words, to what extent does NCSALL, through its research, leadership, and dissemination efforts, influence the professional values, organizational arrangements, and work habits of ABE&L educators and decision-makers? Given NCSALL's brief entry as a central entity in adult learning and literacy circles, such normative determinations must wait until the end of its five-year funding cycle at the very least. Our interim reports, therefore, concentrate on the means by which NCSALL can and does connect to the field, with both last year's and this year's interim reports attending predominantly to descriptions of the work lives of educators and the possibilities of an outside agency's making meaningful connections with them.

The first interim report addressed NCSALL's early evolution as a research center and was based on interviews (nearly 50 total) with an equal number of NCSALL staff and ABE&L educators. We found that the field was highly amenable, even eager, to learn about research that had immediate implications for, and was directly applicable to, particular work settings. Educators' preference to acquire such knowledge face-to-face reinforced NCSALL's commitment to implementing the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN)*. NCSALL's research agenda almost exclusively targeted elements of an effective adult learning and literacy delivery system whereas educators had an equally keen interest in more policy-oriented work that would advocate for greater resources and a more productive occupational structure. Despite this difference, the first report concluded that the field desperately needed and would welcome the roles that NCSALL proposed playing in the adult learning and literacy arena.

This second interim report focuses on the occupational contexts of ABE&L educators and how these interact with their acquisition of knowledge that could improve their work. While the report notes places where NCSALL staff and research actually have entered into these educators' work lives, it is still much too early in NCSALL's existence for this to be a major topic. Instead, we describe the most promising points through which NCSALL could reach the field under current conditions and make recommendations that could guide NCSALL's scope of work in affecting these conditions in future funding cycles.

* The PDRN is a research and development initiative within NCSALL; the goal of the PDRN is to create and support systematic partnerships between practitioners and researchers in order to strengthen NCASALL research and make the research results available and useful to the field. At the time of this evaluation, the PDRN was operating in eight states. In each state, an ABE practitioner serves as a PDRN Practitioner Leader, acting as a liaison between NCSALL and the practitioners in his/her state.

Selection of Interview Participants and Interview Topics

The group of interview subjects consisted of 60 adult basic education and literacy decision-makers and practitioners. We defined decision-makers as those who had formal responsibilities for setting ABE&L policy in a region or state and/or who had formal administrative responsibilities for supervising ABE&L teachers and other staff. These included state ABE directors, directors of literacy resource centers, directors of public and private ABE and adult literacy centers (including literacy councils and coalitions), and local ABE program supervisors. Practitioners worked with adult learners directly, through volunteer, part-time, or full-time teaching positions. Overall, we interviewed nearly an equal number of each.

We selected interviewees from ten different states. Five of these were part of the PDRN and five were not. Using information given us by Jim Parker of the US Department of Education, we tried to match the states in terms of adult education resources and outreach. This was in an attempt to reduce some of the contextual variations that might influence interviewees' perspectives on ABE&L issues.

We used several means to identify interview candidates. First, in the PDRN states, we partially relied on referrals from PDRN coordinators and people we had interviewed last year. Our request was for people who were "active" in ABE&L circles beyond their specific job descriptions. This was done to intentionally come up with a list of contacts who were most likely to have taken part in, conducted, or at least known about professional development activities – and therefore would have engaged in activities where it was conceivable that they could have encountered information about NCSALL's work.

Second, to add to the list of interview candidates in PDRN states and to gain an initial point of contact in the non-PDRN states, we used NIFL's Directory of National and State Literacy Contacts. This gave us staff at the state departments of education, coordinators of regional agencies, and the directors of various literacy councils, coalitions, and task forces.

Third, we then used further recommendations from our initial interviews, particularly to find names of local practitioners. We intentionally sought a mix of those who had part-time and full-time positions, as this distinction quickly became an important one in determining the magnitude of the constraints affecting their participation in professional development activities.

Essentially we asked people to talk about the details of their work, the context within which they worked, their overall approach to adult education and literacy (specifically in terms of their goals for adult learners), and how they went about learning more about how to do their work. Within this overall frame, we then probed more

specifically on a variety of issues such as instructional strategies, definitions of appropriate curriculum, assessment techniques, facilitators and obstacles to their work, needed resources, etc. Finally, we asked them specifically about their contact with and/or awareness of NCSALL and/or its products.

Work Contexts and Knowledge Acquisition

ABE&L educators came in all shapes and sizes. Some worked full-time, some worked part-time, and some were volunteers. They worked in several branches of state government and in a myriad of its programs, in school districts, in private non-profits, and in community and four-year colleges. They taught near-high school graduates, near illiterates, refugees, voluntary immigrants, displaced workers, and welfare recipients. They held classes in school buildings, houses, restored train stations, prisons, factories, and donated nooks. They infrequently had several colleagues in close proximity doing essentially the same work, they occasionally had one or two such colleagues, and they often worked alone. Their style of working with students included tutoring individuals, monitoring students' computer-assisted progress, individualizing basic skills instruction in a group setting, doing "stand up" teaching of a single subject to a whole group, using cooperative groups, addressing lifelong skills or "whole person" instruction, and developing inquiry skills. To say that someone was an ABE&L educator conjured up more a sense of a deep commitment to working with people that regular schools had failed than a vivid image of where, how and with whom the educator worked.

ABE&L is a widely disparate field, then. This circumstance makes it a particularly difficult one with which to connect – both among those in it and those trying to reach it with professional knowledge and skills. And this difficulty is more often the product of a literal inability for educators to access research than of an ingrained resistance to outside expertise.

This section presents what we learned in talking with these educators about these difficulties. While we detail these, we do not dwell on them. The goal always is to emphasize where connections between research and practice exist. We begin with a discussion of contextual situations that impede professional development for ABE&L educators, which necessitates emphasizing the resource-starved nature of the field. We next characterize professional development opportunities that are available in each state to those who are in a position to take advantage of them. It was clear that there were gatekeepers for these professional development opportunities, and the third part of our "findings" identifies them and the ways they affected knowledge acquisition. It was also clear that the "value" of the content of professional development activities hinged on educators' goals for working with adult learners. Thus, the fourth part of this section defines important differences among goal definitions and the kinds of topics associated with them. Finally, this section concludes with a discussion of a topic about which there

was no disagreement: the most effective means of transmitting information was through face-to-face interaction.

Contextual Influences on Professional Development Opportunities

As ABE&L educators described their efforts to access research and information that would improve how they served adult learners, we were struck most by the huge structural constraints that frustrated this endeavor. The field's heavy reliance on part-time teachers (75 percent nationwide) was perhaps the biggest barrier.

Organizational necessity and personal preference fed this reliance. Having part-time teachers was necessary because programs had limited resources. Part-time staff tended to be hourly workers, with little paid time for class preparation and almost none for professional development. For the most part, such staff received no job benefits like insurance. Nevertheless, some people preferred this situation because it gave them flexibility to raise children, to take on teaching as a retirement "hobby," to supplement their income, or to get a foot in the door leading to a full-time job.

The predominance of part-time positions bothered most ABE&L educators. They thought it drove good people out of the occupation and prevented others from entering it.

> *The key issue is employment conditions for teachers. It has a very big impact on the field. I am one of the few people who spent 18 years in full time positions. . . . Teachers are constantly burned out from part time jobs. Very creative people either burn out or leave, or are always just trying to keep their head above water. (full-time teacher)*

> *There are no full time jobs in New Hampshire. That feeds directly into how you keep teachers. You can train them up the wazoo, but they can't survive. We lose them - there's too much work for too little money. I have direct contact (with students) for 6 hours and get paid for 6 hours. The job has low number of hours and low stature. If you are really doing the job, it takes twice as much. (part-time teacher)*

This, of course, varied somewhat by state and program, but everyone – even those who desired to remain part-time – noted its debilitating effect on educators' having time to share and acquire information. Like all occupations, those new to ABE&L often needed induction training.

> *Part-timers teach on the side. It is just extra income. They come into it with a K-12 mentality, but K-12 pedagogy just doesn't work. I have to "unlearn 'em and reteach 'em." (full-time teacher)*

And, for those who had been in their positions for a while, there was the continuing need to learn more about how to do their work effectively. But there was simply no paid time for this to occur.

> *In a rural state we have part-time teachers. Those people have other jobs; so to keep them trained and taking part in staff development activities is very, very difficult. (statewide trainer)*

Comparisons between the professional lives of part-time and full-time teachers were both stark and dramatic.

> *Full-time teachers in the state meet once a quarter to share information. This year [the state university] did an inquiry project with 13 of us. We met four times to discuss research, and we also had daily access to one another via email. We use each other. But that is not a factor for the part-timers. There is no mileage or expense money to pay them. The part-timers meet once a year for five hours as part of mandatory staff development. They are not paid. It is a hostile audience. (full-time teacher)*

> *Many teachers don't have contracts and security. Anything I do beyond my hourly rate, I don't get paid for. It is difficult to ask teachers without contracts to be asked or mandated to do things they won't be paid for. . . . There is a line we draw – I need to read journals, but if I am not being paid? It is a two-edged sword. We want to be professionals and continue our education, but it would also be nice to have perks that other teachers have like a contract or other benefits like sick and retirement. There is a line I resent—being asked to be professional, but get nothing in return. I love what I do, and will do things without being paid, but enough is enough. (part-time teacher)*

> *There is no comparison between part-time and full-time. When I was part-time, everything other than teaching was done on my own time. As full-time teachers, we have a wonderful schedule. On Fridays, we can have staff meetings. And the statewide conference? We all go. But when you are part-time, nothing like that is funded. (former part-time, now full-time teacher)*

Even informal sharing among colleagues was difficult. ABE&L programs often used other agencies' workplaces during off-hours, which afforded staff no permanent, or even regular, place to congregate. Moreover, particularly in rural areas, these places were often far apart. Thus, teachers rarely even saw their peers, much less had time for the "shop talk" that they wistfully saw as a key to professional growth.

A big barrier is probably being rural and working alone. I am not working with a team to bounce ideas off. There is no dialogue on a class by class basis. (part-time teacher)

Thus, ABE&L part-time educators worked in sparse, separated, and resource-poor situations for the most part. They had low pay, no pensions, little health benefits, no vacation or sick time, minimal preparation time, and sporadic training opportunities. Beyond the obvious impacts of differences in employment status on professional development opportunities, ABE&L's disproportionate reliance on part-time teachers was both symbolic and symptomatic of a resource-starved field.

I feel that adult education is treated like a step-child. Even my own daughter used to say, "why don't you become a real teacher?" We don't have the full respect of the public. Adult education is not funded adequately. The money doesn't get to the teachers. We need professional parity. That is my biggest hurdle. I make very little money even though I have been in it my entire professional life. (part-time teacher)

Several images of the ABE&L situation arose in the interviews. The one that seemed most appropriate was "subsistence farming." Decision-makers seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time fighting for level funding. Drawn from a hodge-podge of sources, this funding was merely enough to maintain the part-time, patch-worked staffing patterns. For their part, most teachers taught to get paid. Outside the classroom, few occupation-related activities were remunerated. Thus, programs did well to support their day-to-day work lives. There was no spare time or money to grow as professionals or in the numbers of hours of paid work. Obviously, such circumstances boded poorly for an outside agency's being in a position to have much of an impact on what transpired in classrooms.

The Availability of Professional Development Opportunities

This gloomy observation should not be construed as saying that professional development did not occur. Indeed, it was high on most people's lists of desirable but hard to achieve priorities, and we found provisions for it in each state, as evidenced in the following examples.

Arkansas has a dual system of professional development opportunities for ABE&L practitioners. First, the various state colleges offer courses toward certification in adult education. The state is making a push to certify all ABE teachers, and the degrees can only be obtained through approved programs. Occasionally, the state's literacy resource center (recently moved from a remote southeastern location to Little Rock) will offer training that gives participants hours toward certification, but for the most part this aspect of professional development is the province of the colleges. Second, the resource center regularly arranges other workshops on topics of interest for

practitioners. These events include using a NIFL grant to train a state staff member to conduct workshops on working with learning disabled students and to support the workshops themselves as well as offering sessions on understanding and implementing state ABE guidelines and policies. Participants are reimbursed for mileage and overnight accommodations (if they have to travel more than 150 miles to a workshop) but are paid for their time only if their local sponsoring agency does so. The resource center serves as a broker, connecting presenters with particular expertise in the workshop topic to practitioners with an interest in that topic. Traditionally the center has disseminated a catalogue listing training sessions and relied on word-of-mouth to advertise these opportunities to ABE&L educators. The Center also was the agency responsible for distributing *Focus on Basics*, a "wonderful" publication, according to its director.

In Tennessee, the Center for Literacy Studies (CLS) has evolved as the de facto provider of nearly all ABE&L workshops in the state. A variety of state events facilitated this development, including changes to the welfare program (recipients could postpone the eighteen-month clock for finding work by enrolling in 20 hours a week of adult education) and changes in state ABE staff. State staff now turn to the Center to handle training on topics they deem important, local decision makers and practitioners readily contact the Center for any and all information needs, and Center staff dominate the programs of various regional and state conferences (such as those sponsored by the Tennessee Association for Continuing Education). Information needs have intensified because the welfare program changes, for the first time, have put large numbers of students in ABE classrooms that were not there voluntarily. According to educators, the Center's participation stamps an event as worthy of attending and having a high likelihood of being useful. The teachers we talked to (both part-time and full-time) and the county level supervisors had all attended a CLS session at one time or another – and highly complimented the presentation and the information.

> *Staff development is very good in adult education because CLS is wonderful. They have people who have been there and done it. They have practical ideas and solutions to problems, plus the staff are so aware of what their problems are. In regular education, in-service is a waste of time. Here it is not –largely because of CLS.* (Tennessee ABE full-time teacher)

The New Hampshire state department contracts with a local program director who in turn works closely with the New England Literacy Resource Center to plan and administer the two state conferences a year which are a primary staff development tool. As one teacher described it:

> *Professional development in New Hampshire is very simple. We do two conferences a year. They (state) offer professional development money at your hourly stipend rate to attend the conference (up to 6 hours a year is reimbursed). New Hampshire is also setting up sharing groups. We get together once every four to six weeks to discuss key issues. Last year was our first year trying it. It*

was not a huge success, but a good success. We sit around for an afternoon and we cross-pollinate ideas using our different learning materials.

Each conference has a theme (this fall it was on developing curricula to correlate with the new standards) while last year the themes were civic participation and student empowerment. Their selection of topics is driven by needs assessments of participants and also looking outside of New Hampshire to see what other people are doing. As the state coordinator noted, they value the word-of-mouth assessments of value offered in other settings: "If it worked well in Vermont, I trust it will work here."

Most of the money for adult education (80 percent) in Minnesota comes from the state – one of the highest percentages in the country. For ABE&L educators, this has been both a blessing and a curse. The state's dominant role has enabled funding to keep pace with the educational needs of an increasing influx of immigrants, but all of the funds must be spent directly on local program delivery – and not for professional development or technology. The state has contracted with the Literacy Training Network (LTN) at the University of St. Thomas to provide professional development services for adult educators, but even the funds for this have been greatly reduced. To compensate, the state has asked the 55 assorted ABE&L consortia in the state to contribute one percent of their budgets to professional development. About 70 percent have done so. However, only two of the largest five in the state are cooperating, and those five are responsible for half of the adult instruction in the state. The LTN uses a trainer of trainers model in which they identify and train a cadre of local practitioners who then offer turnkey training at 16 regional locations. Two primary sources of information are used to identify training topics: (1) ongoing needs assessments/surveys of practitioners around the state, and (2) the LTN staff, who constantly scan the field via attending conferences, visiting web sites, communicating with federal employees and other states electronically, and reading print materials.

We found very few instances of locally-based professional development (i.e., professional development offered directly by programs to their staff). Moreover, organizations at this level varied considerably in the extent to which they encouraged and facilitated practitioner attendance at activities like those above. Even examples of regular informal sharing among teachers were few. The reasons for this were readily acknowledged: a sparse, dispersed teaching staff (i.e., a small number of teachers having multiple work locations – for classrooms and offices – and differing time schedules) which made it difficult for more than a handful of people to be physically proximate very often (especially in rural areas) and few provisions for paid professional development time.

The exceptions were notable. For example, in Vermont, four different non-profit adult education organizations serve regions of the state, and there is a determined effort in each to have mostly full-time staff. This commitment provides a luxury missing in many situations. As an educator in one of these centers explains:

We say, "Teach your heart out on Monday through Thursday and keep Friday open for professional development."

Reserving Fridays for class preparation, reading, going to conferences, and even doing paperwork, also makes it possible for staff to talk to one another, enabling each to be sources of valuable craft and research-based knowledge. For example, a teacher in one of Vermont's agencies participated in NCSALL's multiple intelligences project as a practitioner researcher. The person shared the systematic in-class observations, as well as what others in the project were learning, with colleagues, who subsequently reported that they had become much more attuned to adult learning styles and what teachers could do to accommodate them.

Similarly, a private, non-profit ABE&L center in Rhode Island reserves Fridays for in-house staff development and meetings, again made possible through a largely full-time staffing arrangement. Several staff from the center have found time to become involved in study circles sponsored by NCSALL through the PDRN; and while they still must squeeze reflection opportunities into busy lives, they nevertheless acknowledge that the potential for doing so is much greater than in other situations in which they have worked.

Another center, in New Hampshire, has mostly part-time staff. The majority of them have been there for more than a decade, as has the director. Even with the obvious constraints that part-time work presents, they all participate in planning and research activities that contribute to program improvement. For example, they hold weekly meetings in which they review curriculum goals, their attainment, and needed adjustments in the program. They also devote two days during the year to special topics, such as curriculum and teacher-based research. Another three days at the end of the year afford them the opportunity to project what they want to do with the program in the coming year.

These teachers in Vermont, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire were among the very few who enjoyed locally-based professional development as an expected and routine activity. Most others in the field experienced the opposite, and this engendered in them almost a thirst for time to read, reflect, and learn.

The Role of Gate-Keepers in Professional Development

Much ABE&L professional development appeared to be a "gated" phenomenon. As strongly hinted in the above examples, practitioners were often dependent on people in key decision maker roles – e.g., teacher supervisors and program directors – for hearing about relevant research information, receiving notices about workshops, arguing for and securing funds to pay for professional development, arranging meetings to discuss work-related issues, and even delivering training. The centrality of these

gatekeepers was a function of the contextual constraints practitioners faced; there simply was little time and money for them to locate, access, and act on information on their own.

The above discussion offered insights into some of the state-level gatekeepers in four of the states. ABE professors at the state colleges and literacy resource center staff in Arkansas, the Center for Literacy Studies in Tennessee, a local program director in New Hampshire, and Minnesota's Literacy Training Network all influenced greatly a major portion of the eventual professional development content available to practitioners. Teachers' more immediate supervisors, in turn, affected the practitioners' ease of access to acquiring this information.

We discovered important gatekeepers in each state, based on the triangulated comments of local and state practitioners and decision-makers. The following are three such examples.

In Delaware, one state-level administrator and six regional service center directors coordinate adult education. The state provides professional development at conferences and special training sessions, and each center develops and implements its own professional development agenda. In at least one of the regional centers, a specific individual has the primary responsibility for arranging and/or designing activities for its respective cadre of teachers. This is a sizeable job, as the center employs more than 60 teachers. Local staff development coordinators meet monthly with the state department administrator, putting them in the position of exerting considerable influence on the entry of research into practice in the entire state.

In Vermont, the director of the state's literacy resource center receives the bundle of NCSALL's Focus on Basics. This person sees great value in the publication and makes sure that copies are sent to staff in all four of the non-profit organizations that teach ABE&L in the state. In fact, the person often duplicates additional copies so those relevant policy makers can have visible reminders that adult learning is a significant state funding responsibility. The same person promotes many of the regional adult education meetings and, because a lack of funding has prevented holding a statewide conference specifically devoted to ABE&L, sees to it that the agenda of broader statewide gatherings includes ABE&L sessions.

The Governor's Council on Literacy in West Virginia has a "visionary" – as identified by those in the state – who has promoted adult and family literacy for two decades and through four different gubernatorial administrations. This service history has put the person in a position to affect state ABE&L policy and to generate funding (including a small endowment) for training, program development, and student scholarships. Closer to the classroom level, a staff member of a technology center operating at one of the regional service agencies builds and maintains the adult education web pages, supporting electronic networks, gives training and technical assistance to

local programs, and works with teachers on maximizing technology use in their classrooms.

As the three examples illustrate, gatekeepers can only sometimes be predicted to occupy certain positions within the structure of a state's ABE&L system. A literacy resource center director in one state may be an ardent professional development advocate and may not be in another – likewise for local program directors, regional ABE supervisors, and coordinators of volunteer efforts. Identifying the people who best can serve as effective connect points between research and practice, then, is at least partially dependent on having idiosyncratic information about a particular state.

Valued Professional Development Content and the Goals of ABE&L

Gatekeepers, obviously, can – and do – both facilitate and impede practitioners' access to research and other job-related information. For the most part, practitioners viewed gatekeepers' actions positively, although some suspected that supervisors screened information and opportunities depending on the gatekeepers' definitions of ABE&L priorities. This suspicion may be significant because we found that ABE&L educators, including key gatekeepers, did disagree about critical issues for teachers to know about. Some thought that information about state regulations, standards, and accountability measures was most pertinent to a program's effective operation and others advocated for attention being given to effective instructional practices and characteristics of adult learners. The kind of information that they valued seemed to mirror their definitions of the goals of ABE&L. The former group stated that their program's focus should be utilitarian, immediate, and specific. Interview participants often succinctly summarized this perspective as "GED and out." The latter talked more expansively about their work, emphasizing "lifelong skills" and students' becoming constructive workers, citizens, and parents, along the lines of the language in Equipped for the Future (EFF)*.

The two points of view represent more a continuum than a dichotomy. For example, in Tennessee, we found expressive advocates for each end of the continuum and a couple of points in-between.

> *I'm not a conventional teacher. I realize (students) quit before because they didn't like conventional teachers. They rejected conventional school. The thing I have to do first is to make sure they keep coming to class. I'll let them have a say. For instance, "we could do social studies now or work on essays or science." I treat them like adults. My philosophy is learning is fun. They should have a good time. We will do "smart cooking" and "wise shopping," make up good healthy*

* EFF is an initiative of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). Its purpose is to build consensus around what adults need to know and be able to do in today's world and then design an accountable adult literacy system that supports those results.

menus. Also we're learning social skills. I'm just an old hippie. I don't give pop quizzes. I write criticisms and praise. I figure they got so many Fs in school they don't need any more. I can pick something out – a good point: "I like the way you think." (Tennessee Families First part-time teacher)

It depends on the students' situations. In Families First, I do much more of a life skills approach – work ethics, nutritional education. That's the whole person. With literacy level students, again we do the same thing. But with students at a higher level, just falling short of a diploma, those are "get me in, get me out" – and are not as attached to us. So I play it by ear depending on the student. (Tennessee ABE full-time teacher)

The whole goal is to get a decent job, so I've always related class to work. I used to suggest more schooling for some, but Families First wants them out quick. So basically the class is to pass the test, but ultimately they have to work. We're supposed to do life skills twenty percent of the time (one hour a day, reserved for the last of the day's five hours of instruction). We get different speakers to come in. But the students resent that. They feel like they already know that. But I still will take them "Krogering" (a southern supermarket chain). (Tennessee Families First full-time teacher)

Anyone who comes into adult education is not here for a long session. It's pass the GED and get out of here. We do life skills but that is not as important to them as finishing. (Tennessee County ABE Supervisor)

Despite the eagerness for professional development we detected, there was the potential for a decided mismatch between the content desired and the content given in workshops. Educators, such as the first two above, responded positively to the kinds of issues raised by the multiple intelligences, motivation theory, health and literacy and Equipped for the Future. On the other hand, the last two had a much more utilitarian focus: What is needed to make this program operate the way the state wants it to? Illustrating the dilemma, a fifth Tennessee teacher, a part-timer, summarized:

The county wants to get them through as quickly as we can. I have a conflict with that. I like to read children's literature to the class. (My students) get excited about that. They want me to show them the pictures. I want to make them understand that they can do these things at home and all their lives. But, the county is worried about the numbers.

The above discussion applies specifically to classroom practice, but we found that this utilitarian/lifelong learning distinction cropped up throughout the interviews, in discussions of appropriate success indicators, in assessments of how helpful certain decision makers were in supporting ABE&L, as well as in the kinds of topics about which educators wanted more information.

Effective Dissemination through Face-to-Face Contact

Given the near unanimous appetite for more – or, in some cases, any – professional development, one might expect that this audience would be relatively non-discriminating in their evaluations of fare they were served at conference and workshops. For the most part, this supposition would be correct; few educators criticized these experiences at all. Indeed, several pointed out that the ambivalence about "in-service" that they had heard and seen in the K-12 world had not emerged in ABE&L. However, one consistent preference was for face-to-face contact in learning about and discussing information.

> *The most information we get when we go to workshops is sitting down with other teachers. The workshop leader may not have even been in a class, so talking with other people is better. (We can ask each other) "How are you handling this?" (full-time teacher)*

> *One of the best sources for my information is using the practitioners and program administrators in the field. Good ideas are contagious. The best way to go forward with a good idea is the pulling together of people in the field. They are my number one source of information. (state director)*

> *Networking (with other practitioners) is the key thing. We have regional meetings. We connect with our own areas as well as sites from around the state. We talk about programs and see what other sites are doing. We connect about materials. If you don't have that you get lost in the dark. (part-time teacher)*

Educators said that these contacts had several tangible benefits. They were more likely to leave with materials in hand that they understood how to use in their work; and they would meet people with similar problems, which enabled them both to find promising new avenues to try that already had survived the test of practicality and to develop a collegial problem-solving network.

> *…nothing beats the face-to-face opportunity to sit around a table and just brainstorm how you hope to implement a program. That is invaluable to pick the brains of others. (state director)*

The bottom line, then, was that real growth and learning took place through sharing experiences, discussing successes and failures, and making sense of research in concrete terms.

Although educators mentioned other ways they accessed information, such as via print and the internet, we found only a couple of practitioners who regularly used these

resources. Even the gatekeepers, who seemed to have a steady flow of newsletters and notices cross their desks, relied most heavily on word-of-mouth to identify worthy professional development possibilities. Within the print category, newsletters appeared to be the most widely read source, with those put out by state offices, associations, and NCSALL receiving the most mention in PDRN and non-PDRN states alike. Focus on Basics was always praised for its style and content. Educators found it on resource tables at conferences, at the literacy resource centers, in inter-office mail, and occasionally in conversations. However, few of the participants in our interviews received the newsletter regularly.

Summary and Recommendations

The ABE&L field is clearly eager for any taste of information that could positively affect its work. Unfortunately, for most practitioners; it seems little comes their way regularly and few have the luxury of taking advantage of the meager opportunities around them. This difficulty in accessing research, we think, is a systemic issue, with problems appearing at the production, distribution, and consumption points of the research dissemination supply chain.

At the production level, we have noted that educators' definitions of the goals of ABE&L may temper their perceptions of what kinds of research information are most useful to them. Apart from this issue, however, both the interviews this year and last highlighted a desire for research to be readily applicable to educators' specific work situations. For their part, ABE&L decision-makers – charged with the responsibility for sustaining their programs from year to year – would like information that aids their advocacy for increased resources; ABE&L practitioners want to better understand how adults learn and the instructional strategies that both motivate and enable adults to learn better. Thus, the field sees a need for both policy-oriented and learner-centered studies.

At the distribution level, we have learned from talking to practitioners in the past two years that while the kind of research available is of some concern, it is much more worrisome that research remains so inaccessible to them. The problem is at least two-fold. On one hand, practitioners encounter inconsistent and limited support for acquiring knowledge. It is simply a financial and, thus, a personal hardship for many of them to attend workshops and training sessions. On the other hand, research – even that with direct, practical implications – is not often disseminated in the places that practitioners prefer to frequent, namely interactive group settings. As a consequence, neither practitioners nor recent research seem to connect with one another often or routinely.

Finally, practitioners explain that they are not in a position to fully digest information they acquire. This is a ubiquitous issue in research dissemination: Whose responsibility is it to translate research into practical implications? Practitioners are at times idiosyncratic, wanting information to be targeted specifically for their realm of ABE&L with their categories of students and for their mix of working conditions. A lack

of time to plan and fleeting chances to interact with knowledgeable people, they argue, precludes their being very effective in turning general research findings into concrete actions.

These points, we feel, have several implications for actions NCSALL should consider taking as it fulfills its leadership position in ABE&L.

First, in relation to dissemination: if NCSALL's research is going to reach practitioners, then it has to identify, train, and support people who are – or who can become – familiar and work with ABE&L decision makers and practitioners in each state. The current PDRN is a small step in this direction, but it will have to be extended to the remainder of the states and expanded to include direct training. Educators in Arkansas and Vermont touted the opportunity to have NIFL-sponsored workshops and "training of trainer" sessions in their states. This brought recent research directly to educators in a forum that allowed for follow-up questions and increased the technical assistance resources subsequently available in the states. The field is desperate for access to people who are knowledgeable about research, able to derive implications from it for practice, and skilled in developing, marketing, and delivering training.

Particular dissemination arrangements most likely will have to vary from state to state. NCSALL might best establish close, collaborative organizational relationships in states where there are existing and well-respected adult literacy centers, as it has in Tennessee with the Center for Literacy Studies. Other states with fewer institutional resources available may require its own individual coordinator or, at the least, share one with several neighboring states. The person would not necessarily have to be a full-time employee of NCSALL, but the position would certainly have to entail many more hours than currently is the case in the PDRN. One possibility is for the role to be jointly funded by NCSALL, other national organizations/associations, and/or state entities. Given the scarce resources in ABE&L, it would likely be counterproductive for this assistance to be on a for-fee basis, although that is currently being attempted in Minnesota.

The important point is that someone knowledgeable about research and skilled in communicating it to others has to be in a position to reach key gatekeepers and, through them, practitioners. Because neither practitioners nor researchers seem to be well-positioned to translate research into practice, this sort of boundary-spanning, context-savvy role clearly is called for if dissemination is to be truly effective.

Second, in relation to advocating for the field: ABE&L is under-funded and its practitioners endure occupational conditions that would be unacceptable in the K-12 world. In our interviews, educators longed for advocacy help in altering these circumstances. They asked for explanations about why educating adults was important and how it affected the quality of life of those around them; they desired demographic data that compellingly conveyed the size and complexity of the adult education task and the amount of resources needed to accomplish it well; and they wanted research-based

information about the directions in which adult education should be moving. In short, ABE&L educators were looking for some place and/or someone to contact to shore up their attempts to garner more support for their struggling programs.

K-12 education is besieged with advocacy groups -- from politicians to citizen taxpayer groups, from corporation-funded blue-ribbon panels to watchdog committees, from task forces to coalitions. The often-grating cacophony arising from the shouted criticisms and claims actually sounds one clear and repeated note: K-12 education matters. The meddlesome intrusions of outsiders in public schools might actually be a welcomed development in ABE&L – if it would lead to greater attention being paid to the field's needs. Educators argue that the field and its importance is not visible enough to those from whom they must wrestle money. NCSALL, with its reputation and institutional affiliation, is in a position to magnify that visibility, especially through a heightened physical presence at the state and local level and a shift in its research agenda to include more policy-oriented studies.

The need for another kind of advocacy is also apparent. ABE&L is clearly divided about its purpose. Is it solely targeted at giving adults the immediate credentials and skills needed to get relatively low-paying jobs, or is its aim to equip adults for broader roles as parents, workers, and citizens? We found both perspectives present in each state and frequently within the same program, and they were typically justified on the basis of individual experience or bureaucratic emphasis. NCSALL's program of research is creating a knowledge base with direct implications for what ABE&L programs should look and sound like. Many in the field will have to be convinced of the relevance, practicality, and value of that knowledge base.

Third, in relation to funding for dissemination and advocacy: funds for these activities should not compete with research funds. Our recommendations are not intended to result in slicing a modest pie into more pieces. NCSALL, other ABE&L centers around the country, and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) must add to current ABE&L center funding to support these roles. ABE&L quite simply has no infrastructure to take advantage of significant research findings or to generate on its own the kind of attention the field needs. Barely in a position to sustain itself in its current condition, ABE&L will require powerful partners to grow and improve its service to adults.

We are arguing, therefore, that NCSALL must play three critical roles equally well to best serve ABE&L educators and agencies: researcher, disseminator, and advocate. None of these three can be effective without the other two, and at present there are few people and fewer agencies to fill one of these roles if NCSALL does not.